



## Comoros

### International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, authorities continued to infringe upon this right.

There was no change in the status of the respect for religious freedom, which is sometimes limited, during the period covered by this report. An overwhelming majority, approximately 99 percent, of the population is Sunni Muslim. Government authorities continued to prohibit Christians from proselytizing; however, there were no known instances where the local authorities and population restricted the right of Christians to practice other aspects of their faith.

There is widespread societal discrimination against Christians in all sectors of life.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 838 square miles, and its population is approximately 635,000. An overwhelming majority--approximately 99 percent--of the population is Sunni Muslim. There are fewer than 500 Christian citizens (less than 1 percent of the population). The fewer than 500 foreigners who live on the islands are Hindus, Jehovah's Witnesses, Protestants, Catholics, and members of other Christian religious groups.

A few foreign religious groups maintain humanitarian programs in the country but, by agreement with the Government, do not engage in proselytizing.

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution, which reincorporates Anjouan, Ngazidja (Grand Comore), and Moheli into a new federation that grants the islands greater autonomy, specifically provides for freedom of religion; however, the Constitution says that citizens will draw principles and rules that will govern the country from Muslim religious tenets. While the Constitution does not proclaim Islam as the official religion, government authorities continued to prohibit Christians from proselytizing.

The Grand Mufti is part of the Government and manages a department that handles issues concerning religion and religious administration. The Grand Mufti's position is attached to the Ministry of Islamic Affairs, and he counsels the Government on matters of Islamic faith and ensures that Islamic laws are respected. The Grand Mufti is nominated by the President. The Grand Mufti periodically consulted with a group of elders to assess whether the principles of Islam are respected, and he regularly addresses the nation on the radio regarding social and religious issues such as marriage, divorce, and education.

The tenets of Islam are taught in conjunction with the Arabic language in public schools at the middle school level. There are no separate provisions made for religious minorities in public schools. There are at least two private schools on the island of Ngazidja (Grand Comore) that cost approximately \$27 (15,000 Comorian francs) per month. Almost all children between the ages of 4 and 7 also attend schools to learn to recite and understand the Qur'an, although attendance is not compulsory for religious minorities.

Several Muslim holy days, including the Muslim New Year, the Prophet's birthday, and Eid al-Fitr, are national holidays.

The Government does not require religious groups to be licensed, registered, or officially recognized.

**Restrictions on Religious Freedom**

There are two Roman Catholic churches, one in Moroni, on the island of Ngazidja (Grand Comore), and one in Mutsamudu, on the island of Anjouan. There is a Protestant church in Moroni. Many Christians practiced their faith in private residences. Foreigners were allowed to practice their faith, but they were not allowed to proselytize. If caught proselytizing for religions other than Islam, foreigners are deported, while citizens are imprisoned.

Unlike in previous years, there were no known cases where local authorities and religious leaders harassed Christians on Anjouan.

Bans on alcohol and immodest dress are enforced sporadically, usually during religious months, such as Ramadan. Alcohol can be imported and sold with a permit from the Government.

**Abuses of Religious Freedom**

In September, the island Government of Anjouan dispersed a gathering of several hundred followers of the Djawula interpretation of Islam because the group had not received the required prior authorization from the island government. The authorities also were concerned that the organizers would upset public order. Authorities arrested several participants and shaved their beards before releasing them. This action was taken by the Government in Anjouan in an attempt to quell more radical forms of Islam from taking root on the island.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

**Forced Religious Conversion**

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

**Abuses by Terrorist Organizations**

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

**Section III. Societal Attitudes**

There is widespread societal discrimination against Christians in some sectors of life. On Ngazidja (Grand Comore), there are no legal restrictions that prevent Christians from attending church, and noncitizen Christians are allowed to practice their faith without government intervention as long as they do not attempt to convert citizens. Societal pressure and intimidation continued to restrict the use of the country's three churches to noncitizens.

There is concern that Islamic fundamentalism is increasing as young citizens return to the country after fundamentalist Islamic theological studies abroad and seek to impose a more fundamentalist adherence to Islamic religious law on their family members and associates. The Union Government has established a university, and government representatives stated that an important goal of the university is to give young citizens the option of pursuing university studies in the country instead of overseas where they might absorb more radical ideas. Currently there are 2,087 students enrolled in the university, which provides classes in basic sciences and languages.

**Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. An officer from the U.S. Embassy in Mauritius met with religious leaders on the island of Anjouan during the year.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2005/51461.htm)